

TEAM

The One That Got Away

By Mike Vogel

Things were never better for the 2001-02 Washington Capitals than they were immediately after the team's opening night performance.

A few hours after raising the club's second consecutive Southeast Division championship banner to the rafters of the MCI Center, the Caps and their fans were basking in the afterglow of a thoroughly enjoyable 6-1 victory over the defending Eastern Conference champion New Jersey Devils. After Washington fell behind 1-0 in the first period, training camp holdout Jeff Halpern scored the Capitals' first goal of the season to knot the score at 1-1. It was the first of six unanswered goals - two of them on the power play - by six different Washington skaters. In the process, the Caps chased longtime nemesis Martin Brodeur from the nets; he was replaced at the start of the third period by rookie Scott Clemmensen.

Right wing Jaromir Jagr - obtained from Pittsburgh for a trio of prospects just three months earlier - was among the Capitals' goal scorers that night. Washington fans didn't know it yet, but Jagr and the club were near an agreement on a seven-year contract extension. With the addition of Jagr to a club already replete with stars such as forwards Peter Bondra and Adam Oates, defenseman Sergei Gonchar and goaltender Olaf Kolzig, Washington looked like a solid contender for Eastern Conference supremacy in 2001-02.

Washington and its faithful were not able to savor the spoils of victory for long, however. The schedule required that the Caps play nine of their next 10 games away from MCI Center. The Caps hit the road, and the road hit back.

The first wheel came off the Capital bandwagon on October 8 in Boston. The Caps were in Beantown for a rare Monday matinee to open up the road portion of their 2001-02 schedule. Already down 3-0 to the B's late in the second period (they would go on to lose, 4-0), things got worse when defenseman Calle Johansson was ridden hard and awkwardly into the boards by Boston's Kyle McLaren. Johansson suffered a shoulder injury and left the game; McLaren was also injured and did not return. The pileup in the corner cost both clubs their best defenseman but Johansson's injury would prove to be much more serious. The Boston game would mark the second and final time of the season that Washington would be able to ice the lineup it envisioned as its best after breaking camp.

Thy leaf has perished in the green,
And while we breathe beneath the
sun,
The world which credits what is done
Is cold to all that might have been.

- Tennyson

For of all sad words of tongue or pen,
The saddest are these: "It might have
been!"

- John Greenleaf Whittier

"Well I've lost my equilibrium
my car keys and my pride
tattoo parlor's warm
and so I huddle there inside
the grinding of the buzz saw
whatchuwanthathings to say
just don't misspell her name
buddy she's the one that got away"

- Tom Waits

for five more. But a torn rotator cuff had basically rendered his right arm useless and he underwent season-ending surgery in early November.



Calle Johansson

Game three of the nascent campaign brought more misfortune. The Caps won the game, a 5-2 victory over the Rangers at Madison Square Garden. Jagr recorded two assists in the first period but was the victim of a slew-foot move courtesy of New York goon Igor Ulanov. Jagr hobbled off the ice and did not return. He would miss the next three games and a total of 13 because of Ulanov's unpenalized violation. It would be months before Jagr would return to full strength on the ice.

Washington then went west, where it suffered losses in Anaheim and Phoenix. Co-captain

Steve Konowalchuk was ominously scratched for the final game of the trip in Los Angeles, with "bumps and bruises" given as the reason for his absence. It was later learned that Konowalchuk had been playing through a shoulder injury but that it had popped out of its socket and would require surgery. He would miss the next four and a half months worth of action.

Five games into the season, three core players lost. Co-captain Brendan Witt also missed a pair of games on the trip because of an injury. The Caps were 2-3 at that point, and still had to play four of their next five games on the road.

Peter Bondra gave the team a lift when he scored an overtime game-winner against the Kings in Los Angeles on October 16. The goal came just 21 seconds after the extra session started and was Bondra's first overtime game-winner since April 12, 1992 against New Jersey. That victory lifted the Caps back to .500 and sent them home for the first time in two weeks. The Caps would remain in DC just long enough to do their laundry and take on the Montreal Canadiens.

Before the Montreal game, it was announced that Jagr and the Capitals had come to terms on a seven-year contract extension that would keep the winger in DC through the 2007-08 season.

Jagr returned to the lineup against the Habs and made his presence felt early in the second period. Defenseman Joe Reekie sprang Jagr on a breakaway with a pinpoint home-run pass up the middle of the ice. Jagr took the puck in, deked, shot and scored what would prove to be the game-winning goal in a 4-1 Washington triumph. Three of the four Washington goals came on the power play. The Capitals' extra-man unit was off to a flying start with 11 power play goals in their first 38 opportunities.

The Caps had to head right back out onto the road, hedging up I-95 for a date with the Philadelphia Flyers. The Caps got spanked good in Philly, and played to a 1-1 tie in Tampa Bay. On October 24, they authored a come-from-behind victory in Florida, with Bondra again providing game-winning heroics in overtime. The win lifted Washington's record to 5-4-1.

Washington headed to Atlanta next for the

final away game of its road-heavy October schedule. The Caps launched 37 shots at journeyman netminder Milan Hnilek but not one of them crossed the red line. Midway through the third period, Peter Bondra was whistled for a rather dubious goaltender interference penalty. Thirty-five seconds later, Atlanta rookie Ilya Kovalchuk tucked one short-side between Olaf Kolzig's pad and the pipe. Hnilek made that marker stand up, and the Caps dropped a 1-0 heartbreaker. They also dropped back to .500 at 5-5-1.

"That's been a problem this year; not being able to put 60 minutes together," said winger Dainius Zubrus in the wake of the disheartening loss to Carolina. "And I don't know why because we are a veteran team. We should be able to play a solid 60 minutes but we can't put it together and it's killing us."

The Caps came home to face the Flyers at MCI Center on October 30. Philly's Simon Gagne scored early on a Washington defensive breakdown and then Kolzig surrendered an extremely soft goal. Flyer rookie Pavel Brendl carried the puck up to the red line, chipped it in and curled off to the bench. He sat down just in time to see the puck skitter past a shocked Kolzig to give Philly an early 2-0 lead. The Flyers blanked the Caps, 3-0. Washington dipped below the .500 mark and would not achieve that level again for another six weeks.

Down by a goal late in regulation time, Washington needed a goal with its goaltender pulled for an extra skater to earn a 2-2 tie against Phoenix at MCI Center on November 2. Toward the end of the overtime period, Phoenix's Brad May awkwardly checked Jagr into the board, reaggravating his knee ailment. When the team left for St. Louis after the game, Jagr wasn't on the charter.

Center Adam Oates also missed the St. Louis game; he had an ankle injury. Defenseman Sergei Gonchar left the Blues game (a 4-1 loss) with a groin pull. The season was barely a month old and it was already reminding many of the forgettable 1998-99 campaign in which Washington set an NHL record with 511 man-games lost to injury.

The Caps hobbled to Toronto where they would lose another game without Jagr and Oates in the lineup. Washington returned to DC for some home cooking against Carolina on November 8, but was left with a bad taste in its mouth when the Canes rallied for three third period goals to erase a 2-0 Capitals lead. The loss pushed Washington's winless streak to six straight (0-5-1). The Capitals scored only seven goals in the six-game span.

It was still early in the season, but already there was a sense of things getting away. The team's inability to put together 60 consistent minutes of hockey was costing it standings points.

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Veteran forward Joe Sacco was also miffed.

"We kind of stepped back a little bit and didn't keep the pressure up," he said, of the Capitals' third period effort. "We didn't play the way we did in the first two

periods. We let the game get away and that's the bottom line. There are no excuses to be made. We know we blew it."



Trevor Linden, right, wrestles with Phoenix Coyotes' Daniel Briere during the first period Friday, Nov. 2, 2001, in Washington. (AP Photo)

The Caps briefly righted the ship with a 3-0 blanking of the Atlanta Thrashers on November 10. Just before the start of the game, it was learned that Washington had traded center Trevor Linden to the Vancouver Canucks along with a second round Entry Draft pick in either 2002 or 2003 in exchange for a first round pick in 2002 and a third rounder in 2003.

Linden's tenure as a Capital lasted 28 games. He totaled four goals and seven points over that span. He appeared in 16 games for Washington during the 2001-02 season, scoring one goal and three points.

The good feelings produced by the victory over Atlanta did not last long. Ottawa came to town for a November 13 date and the Senators scored early and often on their way to an 11-5 drubbing of the Capitals. Jagr returned to the lineup but he, veteran defenseman Sylvain Cote and just-recalled rookie blueliner Jakub Cutta all registered minus-fives on the evening. The Caps played without Brendan Witt (death in the family) and Ken Klee (rib injury) and their patched-together blueline corps could not keep up with the speedy Sens. The lone bright spot for Washington was Matt Pettinger's third period goal, the first of his NHL career.

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